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# Once more with feeling: Utterance and social structure

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## *Abstract*

*In this paper, I examine three theoretical sources on the relationship between language use and social structure. I identify common themes which link the concepts of symbolic capital (Bourdieu), social semiotic (Halliday), and ideologeme (Medvedev) and which lead to a critique of the structuralist tradition of semiotic theory. I explore the significance of speech prosody as an integral part of speech communication, and suggest that the utterance needs to be seen as a complex whole in which the structural and dynamic elements of speech are functionally combined. I illustrate this position through the analysis of a sequence of naturalistic dialogue, highlighting aspects of prosodic orientation between speakers and discussing its semiotic significance. I suggest that the mediating concept of speech genre can be used to understand how fluent conversation has both a structured and an improvisatory character. I conclude by suggesting that the activity of producing an utterance in everyday speech may be seen in terms of a musical analogy as performing a variation on a traditional theme. In closing, I identify a number of topics in this field on which our knowledge remains underdeveloped and indicate lines of enquiry for future research.*

*Keywords:* prosodic orientation; improvisation; ideologeme; dialogue; speech genre; symbolic capital.

## 1. Introduction

For much of the twentieth century, thinking about signification, the production of meaning in language, was strongly influenced by the structuralist tradition, deriving from the semiotic theories of thinkers such as Peirce and Saussure (Buchler 1955; de Saussure 1974). Structuralist theory tends to view signification as the product of contrasts between the

formal properties of signifiers, which can be modeled in terms of binary oppositions, e.g.,  $\pm$  voiced for the contrast between the sounds /d/ and /t/ in English. Signifiers are then arrayed in sequences according to rules governing permitted structural combinations (the language's syntax) to generate sentences with a determinate semantic content (Deacon 1997). Others, however, have criticized the structuralist approach for ignoring the way in which language use is bound up with action in a social setting, arguing that to model it as a logical system for the exchange of neutral information misses out the fact that, in any episode of verbal interaction, some people's voices carry more weight than others'; that to understand language, in other words, we need to recognize how it is connected with questions of power, authority, and inequality from which it cannot be divorced (Fairclough 1989, 1992; Hodge and Kress 1988, 1993; Milroy and Milroy 1991). However, relatively little attention has been paid to the role of the dynamic aspects of speech communication, to intonation, pace, and accentual stress, to prosody in short as a constitutive feature of the utterance (Bolinger 1986, 1989).

In this article, I will review three chief theoretical sources that help to amplify our understanding of language as a material activity practiced by people as social beings. I go on to explore the significance for the relationship between language and society of the gestalt properties of speaking (such as intonation), which cannot be adequately modeled in terms of binary contrasts or encapsulated in a matrix of formal distinctive features. Instead, intonation needs to be seen in terms of a continuous flow with a dynamic, shifting contour, so that the 'same' sequence of words can be pronounced in different ways depending on the speaker's emotional state, and will produce different communicative effects—differences of meaning—depending on whether it is spoken affirmatively, ironically, questioningly, etc. I close by suggesting that thinking of language as a system of signs is only half the picture, since every concrete use of a sign sequence is *inflected* in one way or another by its speaker to achieve a certain rhetorical effect. We should think instead of speaking as a communicative activity in which the structural and dynamic aspects of language are functionally integrated in the act of articulating an utterance. This is compatible with the approach adopted by Mäkitalo and Säljö (2002) to the problematic of the relationship between talk and context, when they argue that the analyst needs to take account of relatively stable social practices in interpreting the situated accomplishment of discourse in institutional settings. Moreover, the utterances we produce belong to a certain genre, a characteristic way of combining sense and inflection that conveys enthusiastic agreement, offended contradiction, doubtful querying, or whatever. We develop our command of a repertoire of speech genres

from our experience of social interaction, and exploit this creatively in response to the communicative demands of the immediate situation, so that everyday speech has both a routine, predictable side and an improvised, spontaneous quality at the same time. I illustrate this position through the analysis of a sample transcript of naturalistic dialogue taken from the context of teacher–student discussion in the classroom.

## **2. The profit of distinction**

Bourdieu (1991) develops the concept of symbolic capital in the context of a critique of structural linguistics, which he argues contemplates language as if it were a natural object, thereby ignoring the social heterogeneity inherent in language use. As perceiving subjects, people are disposed to make distinctions between different ways of saying; the different discourses that circulate on the linguistic market are stylistically marked, and not every way of speaking is of equal social worth. This leads him to an analysis of the institution of legitimate authority that is vested in the user of authoritative discourse. The social value accorded to legitimate usage, according to Bourdieu, arises from the correspondence between the hierarchy of linguistic styles and the stratified social order. One cannot open one's mouth without revealing a great deal about where one stands in the social structure, and so language use functions as a marker of social position. Speakers do not simply invent their own style of expression out of nothing, like a magician pulling a rabbit out of a hat; we appropriate and adapt existing ways of speaking and manufacture our individual voices out of the socially marked modes of expression to which we are exposed, in an act of creative fusion. Everyone is endowed with the capacity to speak, but this does not guarantee that our utterances will be judged acceptable. The capacity to produce acceptable utterances, what Bourdieu calls legitimate competence, functions as symbolic capital, which produces a 'profit of distinction' on the occasion of each social exchange.

This symbolic capital is unequally distributed in society, an inequality that is reproduced by its transmission between generations, through institutions of socialization such as the family and the school. Correctness, on the one hand, and distinctive deviation, on the other, are the insignia of legitimate competence, the markers of the social value of the speaker's utterance. The challenge for the speaker in putting their symbolic capital to work on the linguistic market is to display that fully incorporated knowledge of the canons of standard use which allows them to achieve fluency of expression, that degree of virtuosity which has left behind anxiety

about technique, the art that hides art, so to speak. The constant striving for distinction, for a 'stylish' deviation from vulgar use, produces a condition of unceasing motion on the linguistic marketplace, in which what counts as acceptable is always at stake, and competition between the socially available modes of discourse leads to a continuous process of revalorization, in which what was once *de rigueur* becomes old hat, and what was once *infra dig.* becomes *à la mode*. 'For,' as Eliot (1974) put it in *Little Gidding*,

... last year's words belong to last year's language  
And next year's words await another voice.

In general, every utterance is to a certain degree euphemized, since in the very act of speaking we must already anticipate the probable acceptability of our utterance on the given linguistic market. This 'labor of politeness', as Bourdieu calls it, is the source of the self-corrections and self-censorship that govern public discourse, and an evaluation of the likely success of our speech performances is built into the individual's characteristic mode of expression, producing the air of self-assurance or insecurity that their delivery projects. This is not only a matter of the words used, but perhaps even more of the body language, posture, and direction of gaze that express the sense of one's own social worth, the 'hexis' or (literal) standing in the world that one possesses. It is in this sense that Bourdieu (1991) can claim that 'the whole social structure is present in each interaction', not that each speaker is instantaneously conscious of every aspect of the society of which they are a member, but that our molecular, day-to-day dealings with one another presuppose, and serve to reproduce, the stratified system of social relations, rather in the manner that the pressure of a volume of gas is the effect of collisions between the innumerable tiny particles that make it up. The social structure makes the exchange of utterances possible, and by engaging in the mundane activity of social intercourse with one another, we reproduce the social order (Erickson 2004).

### 3. The polyphonic utterance

The theoretical perspective on language as social semiotic developed by Halliday emphasizes the importance of seeing language as a resource for making meaning, a potential that is realized in the exchange of discourse between people (Halliday 1978). A key concept in the theory is that of register. Halliday draws attention to how language use varies according to situation type, and distinguishes three factors that influence this variation,

namely: field (the institutional setting or type of social action); tenor (the role relationships between participants); and mode (the channel through which symbolic communication is organized). A concrete illustration of this framework might be the way in which classroom discourse, the exchange of meanings that takes place between a teacher and a group of students during a lesson in a school, can be understood as a specific, culturally defined register of language use (Cazden 2001). There is a definite institutional setting, the school, which differs from other familiar settings in which talk is produced, such as the family or the workplace, and which circumscribes the kind of discourse that is appropriate. Furthermore, a particular type of social action is being carried out, namely formal instruction, which again differs from the incidental learning that occurs during regular childcare activities in the home, or in children's play. As every child must also learn when they start school, the tenor of the classroom stands in marked contrast to that of the family, i.e., there are expectations built into the setting about the relationship between the teacher and the student that differ from those which hold between the parent and the child, not least in terms of the amount of individual attention the student can expect from the teacher compared with what the child may be used to at home (Skidmore 2004). Finally, language use in the classroom frequently revolves around the written word as the central channel of symbolic communication to a much greater extent than is typical in the home, or in many other everyday settings, e.g., in the teacher's use of the blackboard, the reading of printed text in textbooks or worksheets, and in the writing produced by students in exercise books or on computers that is later marked (written on) by the teacher. Looked at in this way, we can see how the field, tenor, and mode of classroom discourse combine to form an identifiable register of language use that both enables and constrains the kinds of meaning which it is possible to express in this situational context, and which diverge from the semiotic practices found in other types of situation.

It is important to remark that the different domains of functional meaning described by Halliday typically operate in parallel as discourse is produced, e.g., the teacher's question 'What is the capital of Australia?' invokes a simultaneous nexus of ideational, interpersonal, and textual meanings which represent the opening gambit in a semiotic exchange characteristic of this kind of discourse, but which would be out of place in many other settings. This illustrates what Halliday calls the polyphonic nature of the utterance, when he likens speech to a musical composition in which different semantic melodies are overlaid and interwoven with one another; at any given point, different orders of meaning are being organized simultaneously. It is not that we attend now to the ideational

meaning of what is being said, now to its interpersonal or textual dimensions, but that the utterance is a complex, polyvalent whole, in which the different semantic melodies are functionally integrated to form a unified speech composition. Such utterance-compositions are not, however, invented afresh out of nothing each time we speak, but represent a putting-together of elements derived from our previous experience of social interaction, a selection made from the totality of potential meanings available in order to accomplish a particular communicative purpose in the given situation. Spontaneous talk, in other words, has a generic structure; it is improvised around a theme, in the way that a jazz solo relies upon a background chord sequence that harmonizes the player's extemporized melodic innovations.

#### 4. Ideologeme: The inflected sign

Medvedev was a member of the Bakhtin Circle active in the USSR in the 1920s and early 1930s (Brandist 2002; Medvedev 1978 [1928]). His starting point is to affirm that all ideological products are material in nature and form a part of the practical reality in which human beings live and work; they are things made, the product of creative human activity. Medvedev proposes the concept of the *ideologeme* to denote this emphasis on the materiality of ideological signs that are exchanged as tokens of meaning between people enmeshed in a set of social relationships with one another. In discussing the relationship between the artwork and the social reality into which it enters, Medvedev formulates the concept of the 'poetic assignment' of the work of art, the creative extension of the existing ideological horizon that the artist undertakes to bring about. We might adapt this concept and speak of the 'discursive assignment' of the utterance, that is to say its nature as an ideological construct and the labor process of semiosis that goes into its making as a contribution to the process of dialogic exchange. Each utterance carries an ideological freight and has a load to bear in the (re)production of social reality. The mental labor that goes into producing the utterance endows it with a potential social value, but this value is only realized in the process of the exchange of utterances, the joint production of discourse text which is living speech.

An utterance, then, is the product of creative ideological work, an instance of the putting to use of shared semiotic resources. Medvedev's view of the materiality of the sign leads him also to stress the importance of studying sound, and in particular expressive intonation, as an integral component of the way in which nuances of meaning are conveyed in speech—what Medvedev (1978 [1928]) calls 'the word's meaningful

sound'. The everyday utterance is a rhetorical construction, built out of the expressive resources of the genres of everyday speech, and every concrete utterance possesses a specific intonational contour, which is indissociable from the meaning-effect that it aims to achieve in the context in which it is spoken. There is a functional relationship between the prosody of speech and the audience to whom a remark is addressed, which contributes to its success in accomplishing a given social act: think, for instance, of the way in which the 'same' one-word apology ('Sorry!') will carry different nuances, and is likely to be received differently, depending on the tone of voice with which it is spoken and on the vertical social distance that separates the speaker and the recipient. One can imagine this being spoken in ways that are interpreted as sincere, humble, half-hearted, sarcastic, etc.; and one can also envisage the different effects that are likely to ensue if a sarcastic inflection (for instance) is used by a social subordinate to their superior, and vice versa (a child to a parent, for example; and the other way round). Medvedev christens this phenomenon 'speech tact', the aptness of the utterance or likelihood of its producing the intended effect on the situation, the degree to which it succeeds in influencing the course of the dialogue in the direction desired by the speaker.

This emphasis on the intrinsic importance of evaluative intonation in speech communication leads Medvedev to an important development of the theory of mind as inner dialogue, familiar from the work of Vygotsky (1979, 1987) and (using different terminology) Mead (1934). Consciousness can be thought of as a kind of activity in which we learn to engage, the social practice of 'being-conscious', through our appropriation of the speech genres to which we are exposed in our early upbringing and socialization within the family. We learn how to be conscious by joining in with ways of acting which we see others performing around us, and gradually taking them over and mastering them for our own ends, just as we learn how to dress ourselves and feed ourselves, or ride a bicycle. But this consciousness-producing activity is not the mechanical concatenation of logical symbols to form arbitrary strings of sense, mere ratiocination; it is cast in generic forms, impregnated with ideological accents, just as the living speech around us continuously conveys others' attitudes toward the world and toward us. It articulates an evaluative stance toward the reality we apprehend which is an integral part of our sense of self. 'For,' as Medvedev (1978 [1928]) puts it:

we do not think in words and sentences, and the stream of inner speech which flows within us is not a string of words and sentences. We think and conceptualize in utterances, complexes complete in themselves.



We put our feelings into words at the same time as we put our thoughts into words, the one not being possible without the other, and the potential of our consciousness-activity, the scope for thoughtful being available to us, will be richer or poorer according to the repertoire of expressive speech genres to which we are exposed in our ideological environment.

## 5. Further and further apart: Rehearsed improvisation

In this section, I present and discuss a transcript of naturalistic dialogue. In my analysis, I pay particular attention to aspects of the talk that illustrate theoretical points highlighted in the preceding review of the literature, such as the symbolic profit accruing to distinctive deviation, the relationship between register and genre, and the joint extension of the ideological purview achieved through exploratory discussion. Specifically, I show how prosodic features of speech, such as intonation and stress, are used by speakers as a shared semiotic resource to communicate meaning across turns between different participants in dialogue, a feature known as prosodic orientation (Szczepek Reed 2006).

The transcript is an extract from a whole class discussion led by the teacher in an English lesson in a secondary school in southern England. The class is a year 10 group (14–15 years old) of about 30 students, mixed boys and girls, with a wide spread of attainment in the class. The teacher, who is male, is an experienced senior member of staff who agreed to video-record the lesson and make the recording available for research. The lesson took place in January 2006, which means that the class and teacher were used to one another's interactional styles, having had many lessons together prior to this one. In this lesson, the class is discussing the poem *Mother, any distance greater than a single span* (Armitage 1993), as part of their preparation for the GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education) examination in English that they were to take at the end of the next school year. The students have already read the poem and engaged in discussion in pairs about the text, guided by questions on a worksheet supplied by the teacher. The teacher then moves into a whole class discussion; in his exposition at the start of this phase, he asks the students to think about what the poem means, and also the way language is organized in the text. The interaction in this sequence lasts 50 seconds, starting just over 11 minutes into the episode of whole-class discussion, which is 25 minutes long in total. It therefore occurs about half way through this phase of the lesson, and represents about 3% of the discourse in the episode in terms of

duration. It consists of five teacher turns and four student turns as discriminated in the transcript. Transcription conventions are explained in the appendix.

(1)

- 1 T: [...] (.hhh) can you see how  
 2 <gra::dually> (0.8)  
 3 the picture is eme::rging. (.)  
 4 doesn't come out straightaway (0.2)  
 5 (.hhh) we have to keep picking away at it  
 6 Megan did you want to say  
 7 [something (there)]  
 8 M: [o- erm]  
 9 I was  
 10 [going to say that everyone]=  
 11 T: [(hhh) ((coughs))]  
 12 M: =[was s-]  
 13 T: ['scuse me] a sec- jus' a se-  
 14 (.hhh) ((coughs)) ((pats chest)) ((clears throat)) (0.7)  
 15 sorry (.)  
 16 [go on]  
 17 M: [er (.)]  
 18 ↑I was gonna to say that  
 19 everyone was like saying that  
 20 the mother's er (.)  
 21 getting close to the so:n  
 22 but I don't agree with that  
 23 because it's like they're (0.3)  
 24 th- (.)  
 25 they're gettin' ↓fu:rther and ↓fu:rther a↑pa::rt  
 26 'n' he's al↑one in his ↑house (0.5)  
 27 T: yeh th- (.)  
 28 they ↑a::re  
 29 they're getting ↓fu:rther and ↓fu:rther a↑pa:rt aren't °↓they°=  
 30 M: =ye::h=  
 31 T: =now it's ↑something to ↓do: with the rela:tionship with-  
 32 with his ↑mother (0.8)  
 33 erm (0.2)  
 34 ↑can we ge- er  
 35 can we just- >sort of-< shift the fo:cus  
 36 on to what that rela:tionship with his >mother is<  
 37 and what it ↑te:lls us a↓bou::t the relationship (0.5)

38           er °>with his mother<°  
 39           ↑Caitlin

A number of features mark out the extract as belonging to the familiar register of classroom discourse, in which the teacher leads the whole class in discussion. The teacher, for example, controls turn taking by nominating the next speaker (lines 6, 39). He has also chosen the topic (the meaning of the poem and how its language is organized) by instructions given at the start of the lesson. Within this overarching topic, we can see that he also defines boundaries between subtopics. He opens this sequence, for instance, by a summarizing move (lines 1–5), which comments on the preceding discourse, and closes it by using a discursive boundary marker ('Now', line 31), followed by an explicit instruction to change the subtopic ('can we . . . shift the focus', line 35). These features mark the extract as an instance of a topically related set (Mehan 1979), an episode within a larger sequence of discussion where the movement from one phase to another is controlled by the teacher's use of discursive and kinesic signals.

While the teacher is in charge of the process of discussion, however, the substantive text is open to modification by the students in the course of their turns. The teacher's invitation to Megan to speak is a very open question ('did you want to say something?', lines 6 and 7). Almost any contribution relevant to the established subtopic is in order here, and the discourse is far removed from the strict initiation–response–evaluation (I-R-E) sequence found in much classroom talk, in which the teacher asks known-answer questions, then evaluates the student's response for closeness of fit to the canonical answer which s/he has in mind (Sinclair and Coulthard 1975). The use of an authentic question throws the floor open to the student to actively shape the agenda of classroom discussion at this point. Megan's turn is also extended over a series of turn constructional units (lines 17–26; Sacks et al. 1974) and demonstrates a considerably higher level of cognitive engagement and pragmatic competence than the brief one-word or one-phrase answers characteristic of much classroom discourse in the I-R-E mold (Cazden 2001). The discourse is also co-assembled with the teacher, and in his feedback move (lines 27–29) the teacher explicitly signals a gain in the shared understanding of the text which is being negotiated through the group discussion. We can see, therefore, that the jointly assembled spoken text belongs to the socially established register of classroom discourse, in which speaking rights are asymmetrical between the teacher and the students, but that it represents a particular realization of this type of activity, in which students are encouraged to develop their own topic-relevant ideas without being authoritatively judged by the teacher. Following Hasan, we can say that

the generic structural potential (GSP) of the register of classroom discourse admits of many different patterns of interaction in practice, ranging from total teacher monologue to complete *laissez-faire* chat (Halliday and Hasan 1985). The present example conforms closely to the genre of discursive teaching described by Young (1991), in which the teacher uses responsive questioning to enter into a process of shared enquiry with the students, and the precise outcome of the discussion is not known to either side in advance.

If we turn our attention to the content of what is said, we can see Megan's contribution (lines 17–26) as a case of symbolic distinctive deviation, in Bourdieu's terms. Her turn is well-formed and interactionally appropriate within the norms of classroom discourse, being a topic-relevant comment in response to a teacher elicitation; but she goes further, demonstrating an understanding of what has been said so far in the collective speech event, and consciously marking her contribution as a departure from the interpretive consensus that has emerged up to this point. 'Everyone was saying' (line 19) makes an anaphoric reference to the preceding discourse, and also constitutes a reformulation move: rhetorically, Megan is claiming to summarize the gist of what other speakers have previously said, and projects that she is about to express a contrasting point of view, a contrast that is clinched by her subsequent use of an adversative conjunction and an explicit speech act of disagreement ('but I don't agree', line 22). In the local marketplace of ideas formed by the public discourse of classroom discussion, this can be seen as a high-risk venture, since it sets the speaker at odds with the views that have been expressed by her peers (and tacitly approved by the teacher hitherto). It is also a move, however, that carries the potential reward of high symbolic profit, since if accepted by the teacher, it represents a reframing of the collective hermeneutic enterprise and places the discussion on a revised footing, bringing a new perspective on the topic into play. Much depends for the student, therefore, on how the teacher receives this dissenting voice: he could reject it or set it at naught by closing down this avenue of enquiry, but in fact he chooses to affirm its value by revoicing Megan's comments (lines 27–29) and taking them as a cue to move the agenda of discussion on to a related subtopic ('can we just shift the focus ...', line 35).

Drawing on Medvedev's ideas, we can interpret this exchange as the joint construction of an ideologeme, the proposal and acceptance of a fresh insight in the course of exploratory dialogue. Megan's contribution marks a creative extension of the shared understanding of the poem which has been negotiated so far, a new take on the text under discussion which opens further horizons of possible interpretation. The incorporation of this novel perspective into the ongoing flow of discourse is accomplished

in part through the deployment of the dynamic resources of living speech, what Medvedev called ‘the word’s meaningful sound’. There is audible evidence of Megan’s thinking on her feet in the micropauses and restarts that occur in the second part of her contribution, where she searches for the appropriate formulation to explain the reasons for her disagreement (lines 23 and 24). These are markers characteristic of reflective, exploratory talk in which the speaker is assembling a train of thought in the process of articulation, rather than merely reiterating a familiar position or going through the motions of phatic communion. A similar tentativeness can be observed in the teacher’s response (lines 27 and 28), where the ellipsis (‘they are’) has the quality of an affirmation with a note of pleasant surprise, as if one were to say ‘I hadn’t thought of it like that, but now you mention it . . .’. The teacher’s tag question (‘aren’t they?’, line 29) also acknowledges Megan as a co-constructor of the collective discourse at this point, and invites her to reaffirm the argument she has just articulated.

Lines 25 and 29 in fact constitute an example of a recently recognized phenomenon in natural dialogue, namely prosodic orientation, which is ‘the conversational activity of displaying awareness of another speaker’s prosody in the prosodic design of one’s own next turn’ (Szczeppek Reed 2006: 33–34). Specifically, as marked in the transcript, the teacher in his turn (line 29) imitates the stress-rhythm and intonation contour used by Megan (line 25) on the phrase ‘they’re getting further and further apart’. This is known as prosodic matching. By analogy with musical performance, we can see this as a kind of duetting, in which one speaker states the theme, which is then picked up and restated by their interlocutor, often (as here) in a slightly different context of surrounding verbal material, rather in the manner of alternating jazz soloists who are trading riffs. This joint improvisation of variations on a theme lends the interchange a dialogic character in which the shared resource of prosodic dynamics carries meaning across turns by different speakers, binding the discourse together and providing a cohesive force that helps to unify the discussion as a shared social accomplishment. From this point of view, the extract in the transcript can be seen as a kind of rehearsed collective improvisation, a form of discourse that is intermediate between the full spontaneity of informal conversation and the highly structured modes of exchange characteristic of the courtroom or religious ritual. The students have been given the opportunity to rehearse their thoughts ‘offline’ in advance, in semi-private paired talk prior to the present episode of public, whole-class discussion. But in this plenary session, the participants are not simply ‘reciting from the script’: both student and teacher show abundant evidence of thinking on their feet, and of actively listening and responding to each other ‘online’. We can characterize this as a joint exercise in thinking

aloud, in which the teacher's prosodic orientation toward the speech of his students communicates the value placed on their contributions, and demarcates a shared social space for the creative exploration of ideas. Creative teaching is a performance art, a kind of structured improvisation (Sawyer 2001).

## 6. Utterance, genre, and society

In the preceding sections I have surveyed a series of theoretical approaches to language use that are informed by a sociological perspective, namely the theories of symbolic capital, social semiotic, and ideologeme, and sought to illustrate the analytical potential of this framework by using it to investigate the dynamics of speaker interaction in a piece of dialogue recorded under naturalistic conditions. In this section I will attempt to draw together the threads of the argument, asking whether this approach enables us to forge a new theoretical synthesis capable of offering fresh insights into the complex relationship between language use and social structure.

It is, first of all, a position common to all three theoretical perspectives that language needs to be seen in the context of its use by people in society if its nature as an institution is to be properly understood. Those who would understand how language is used cannot avoid getting their hands dirty in the messy and frequently conflictual business of social life. There exists a discursive marketplace on which different ways of speaking enter into competition; but not every way of speaking is of equal social worth. The speaker must take into account local market conditions in deciding what to say (or indeed whether or not to speak in the first place). An act of self-evaluation is implicit in the production of every utterance; our choice of words and tone of voice are governed by our assessment of the probable acceptability of our making a given kind of contribution (a joke, an indication of agreement or disagreement, a protest, the introduction of a new topic, etc.), in the presence of these particular people, at this point in the discussion.

The most fundamental challenge to the idea that power relations are salient to the understanding of discursive interaction comes from the tradition of conversation analysis stemming from the work of Harvey Sacks and his followers (Sacks 1995). The radical ethnomethodological stance of this tradition, inherited from Garfinkel (1967), leads to an insistence that talk can *only* be interpreted with reference to evidence produced by speakers *in situ*, and thus to deny the validity of invoking the influence of structural social inequalities such as class or gender roles in analyzing

interaction where these cannot be demonstrated to be directly observable in the speech produced by participants as they construct the local interaction order. To this we may reply that absence of evidence is not evidence of absence. Living speech is always produced by people as members of a society with a certain structural order that is established upstream of any given episode of interaction. A subordinately positioned speaker may choose to ignore or deliberately break the established pecking order, but not without risk to their subsequent social standing. Thompson pointed out this weakness in his critique of Sacks's account of a dirty joke told by a young man to an audience of male peers, which Sacks manages to discuss without commenting on the possible salience of sexism to understanding the significance of the episode (Thompson 1984). More fundamentally, we may note that the very social roles we use to label and discuss turns in a specific kind of language game (e.g., doctor–patient, teacher–student) are often not explicitly invoked by members in the course of a given encounter. Rather, we produce talk as participants, or discuss it as analysts, operating with a background knowledge of cultural-ideological identities that are taken for granted in the smooth talk of everyday life, e.g., what it is to be a patient to someone else's performance of the role of doctor. Reality work takes place on the ground of history, in the domain of ideology, where, as Thompson (1984) puts it, 'the construction of meaning intersects with asymmetrical relations of power'.

The utterance is not a unidimensional phenomenon, in which a series of logical tokens are combined to form a proposition with a universal, unchanging semantic value. It is an intervention in a process of dialogue *at this particular moment*, and in addition to being a sequence of words recognizable as elements from the language's vocabulary, it is always charged with value for the dynamics of the relationships between the speakers present. At the very least, it realizes an interpersonal order of meaning at the same time as and in parallel with any propositional content it may have, and this polyvalent quality is integral to any concrete speech act—it is not that we first settle the facts with one set of utterances, then adjust our relationships in another, but that any utterance combines work in both domains of meaning at the same time, as a condition of the possibility of reciprocal speech.

A more realistic account of how speech proceeds would seem to be that we learn how to produce certain generic types of utterance, considered as semiotic wholes, and develop a sense of when to deploy this type of utterance rather than that if we want to achieve a particular rhetorical effect, in response to the given dialogic sequence of utterance exchanges that has preceded in the course of an episode of interaction (Bakhtin 1986). Each

individual utterance is unique in the sense that this immediate communicative situation has never happened before and will never be repeated in precisely the same way (with this group of people, in this place, at this moment). But the majority of our utterances are variations on well-worn themes, which have become familiar to us from our personal history of interaction experience. These generic utterance types are very varied, and the possible combinations and exchange-permutations are practically indeterminate; but we do not invent each individual utterance we make afresh, out of nothing, every time we speak. We draw purposefully on the rhetorical resources that our social experience has made available to us to try and take the dialogue forward in a particular way at this point, out of the multitude of possibilities that the culture provides.

This brings us on to the compositional-performative character of utterance making. We have said that most of our utterances can be thought of as realizations or recombinations of generic utterance types that experience has made familiar to us. But each one is nevertheless a specific performance of that type, a creative selection and deployment from the available rhetorical resources to meet the immediate needs of the situation; discourse is a form of bricolage, in which the speaker makes tactical reuse of pre-existing elements (Erickson 2004). Just as the jazz soloist develops a personal style out of an understanding and mastery of the possibilities of technique transmitted by the tradition of their musical form, so the skilled speaker may often be performing an old standard, but will bring to it unique nuances and cadences of expression that mark it out as their own rendition of the motif; as Sawyer points out, structured practice is required to enable the performer to master the process of improvisation (Sawyer 2001). When we get to know people well, we learn to recognize their voice not only in the sense of its acoustic properties, but also in terms of what we might expect them to say and how we might expect them to react on a particular occasion: we anticipate the characteristic utterance types that they may resort to. But we are always apt to be surprised, and the conversation is always capable of taking an unexpected turn and leading us into new territory: we never quite know what someone is going to say next, nor how we ourselves will respond. Fluent, unrehearsed speech relies on a stock of widely shared rhetorical resources, ready-made utterance types so to speak, but adapts them to the unfolding communicative situation at the point of use. This lends to dialogue a dynamic, improvisatory quality alongside its frequent familiarity and predictability of form (Erickson 2004; Sawyer 2001).

The utterance is a composite whole, in which the logic-like side of language as a system (the items of the lexicon and the syntactic structures that define well-formed sentences) is functionally combined with the



compositional, gestalt qualities of intonation and accent to form a semiotic bridge between people (Bakhtin 1986). The prosody of speech is not an optional extra, something added on to the underlying declarative sense of a proposition, the icing on the cake, so to speak. It is an integral part of how we perform acts of meaning (Szczepek Reed 2006; Wennerstrom 2001), for we cannot speak without exchanging social values, and to try to understand how spoken dialogue works without attending to how emotions are communicated at the same time as thoughts is like trying to understand a piece of music by analyzing the score without ever listening to or taking part in a performance. The utterance presupposes and helps to reproduce collective social life; the social order makes the exchange of utterances possible, and also places practical constraints on the kind of social speech act that it is possible or acceptable for a speaker to attempt in a given situation (Erickson 2004). Mediating between the two poles of this relationship, between the macroscopic social structure and the atomistic utterance, is the concept of speech genre, i.e., the *type* of utterance on which a speaker can draw to produce a particular rhetorical effect under given circumstances. Approaching the conundrum of speech in this way helps us to understand how the flux of everyday social activity can be both ordered, displaying regularities in the way people do things, and spontaneous, that is dynamic and open to creative modification by human agency.

Much work remains to be done, however, in clarifying precisely how the relationship between utterance and social structure operates in practice. Our understanding of how emotion is dynamically communicated in speech, for example, is not well developed. Furthermore, from a theoretical point of view, if we accept that much discourse has a generic character and that its form is shaped by culturally transmitted patterns of interaction, more work is needed to clarify how and under what circumstances new speech genres can arise. It is a matter of historical observation that social life does change, albeit at an imperceptible pace, across the generations, so that the tenor of everyday social relationships is not identical today to what it was fifty, or a hundred, years ago. Further studies are needed to help us understand how such unplanned and uncoded shifts in collective verbal etiquette and manners of speaking come into being in the first place, and what relationship they bear to any transformations in the underlying social order. The basic importance of the phenomenon of speech prosody in the conduct of everyday social life, however, was recognized long ago. As Rousseau (2003 [1762]: 38) wrote:

Accent is the soul of discourse; it gives to it feeling and truth. Accent lies less than speech, and it is perhaps for this reason that well-bred people fear it so much.

## Appendix: Transcription conventions

Source: Maxwell Atkinson and Heritage (1984).

[ ]	Overlapping utterances
=	Latched utterances
(.)	Micropause
(0.8)	Measured pause (seconds)
gra::dually	Lengthening, according to duration
th-	Abrupt cut-off of speech sound
house	Accental emphasis
°they°	Quieter speech
↑	Rising intonation
↓	Falling intonation
< >	Slower speech
> <	Faster speech
(.hhh)	Audible in-breath
[...]	Omitted speech
(there)	Doubtful transcription
((coughs))	Description of action

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